

## Mothers in Academia

Mari Castañeda and Kirsten Isgro, eds.  
New York: Columbia University Press, 2013

REVIEWED BY MARGARET MACDONALD

Editors Mari Castañeda and Kirsten Isgro provide readers with a well-researched three-part anthology of the experiences faced by mothers in academic communities across the United States. This collection of essays satisfies an important gap in the literature on academic women's maternal experiences covering Working/learning in the academy while working/learning as a mom (Part I), Unexpected challenges and momentous revelations (Part II), and Creating more parent-friendly institutions of higher learning (Part III). Each section provides 6-7 essays from 31 contributors who are either doctoral candidates (4), in tenure track positions as Assistant (10), Associate (10) or full Professors (3), lecturers (2), as well as an Administrator and a Librarian from across 18 different institutions. With this diverse representation, these women's personal narratives stand as "polyphonic *testimonio*" having "the potential to serve as a critical intervention in the social, political and cultural life of academia" (9). These women share stories of struggle, discrimination, and triumph as they navigate the internal and external policies and expectations of the institutions while raising families. Each story is unique and marked by differences in university and government policies that bind and influence how these women rally against what is described in the introduction and epilogue as a neoliberal climate and institutional culture within the academy.

A common thread these women face is the uncertainty of success as they enter into the long term commitments of their academic career while charged with an additional responsibility, and long term commitment to their children and, in most cases, to their partners. The persistent theme of stress appears throughout the book as the reader is drawn into the day-to-day lives of women who have complex family and work obligations that they are attempting to balance and, for the most part, facing in relative isolation. This latter point is no surprise in the academy, where a persistent emphasis on performance reviews, output and high achievement are hallmarks of the ivory tower. Another less emphasized feature of the academy is the distinct depersonalization of scholarship where individual merit is measured by peer reviewed publication, conference dissemination, and the caliber of teaching and service to the institution and scholarly community. With this emphasis on merit, competition and to a large degree self promotion, it is difficult and in some cases impossible to openly share any weaknesses, fallibility, health concerns,

or fatigue, without feeling unworthy of the position you have attained or are striving for. For mothers in the academy this situation is compounded by also instinctively wanting to have healthy, happy, and well adjusted children. As mentioned by French and Baker-Webster, “No one wants to be “that” colleague who is always late for meetings and unreliable to finish assigned tasks. In the same sense no one wants to be “that” mother who forgets a play date or who can never volunteer to help at the Parent Teacher Association” (171-172). The widely acknowledged term “publish or perish” is mentioned in reference to the pressure that academic mothers face whether or not they have successfully stopped the “tenure clock.” The stories convey the mother academics’ challenges and successes that have been achieved largely through lack of sleep, hard work and dedication, and in some cases inspiration and support from key administrators or colleagues who have gone out of their way to assist them in lessening the load especially before tenure.

In the introduction and the epilogue to *Mothers in Academia*, Mari Castañeda and Kirsten Isgro juxtapose the personal stories of the contributors with the neoliberal oppressive structures and policies that these women face as they navigate the academy with children through their graduate degrees, tenure, and the competitive pressures to manage grants, publish in acceptable outlets, and disseminate research findings. In the epilogue they call into question the flexibility of the academic workload and the ‘rhetoric of choice’ that is often used to suggest that women have somehow put themselves in these positions by ‘wanting it all’ and have a choice around mothering or taking on an academic career. Near the end of the book Castañeda and Isgro respond to this anticipated criticism around choice by stating, “Our choices do not occur in isolation because we often make them accompanied by social pressures and judgements as well as by institutional rules” (229).

## **Got Teens? The Doctor Moms’ Guide to Sexuality Social Media, and Other Adolescent Realities**

Logan Levkoff and Jennifer Wider  
Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2014

REVIEWED BY EMILY JANUARY PETERSEN

When my husband and I decided that it was time to have “the talk” with our oldest daughter, we turned to books. I gathered books from the library for children, and we settled down as a family to read them. My husband squirmed on the corner of the couch and his face turned an unnatural shade of red; I